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Learning not to Learn

On Study: Giorgio Agamben and educational potentiality, by Tyson E. Lewis, London & New York, Routledge, 2013, 174 pp., £100.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-41581-216-0

There are few philosophers of education who would not bemoan the dominant aspects of educational culture which prioritise abstract educational outcomes over educational experience. For Tyson E. Lewis the counter to this is Giorgio Agamben's theory of 'study'. However, 'study' is not only a challenge to this very specific manifestation of instrumental education but also to 'learning' more generally. He tells us that 'If learning teaches the proper use and meaning of signs and things, then studying, if it is truly distinct from learning as an educational activity, must have its own domain, its own methods' (75). Learning becomes the necessary straw man against which Lewis is then able to base his argument. Lewis's conceptualisation of learning, here and elsewhere, is nothing to do with any conventionally received notion of learning, which – to use a particularly mundane example - the first definition in the OED describes as 'The action of receiving instruction or acquiring knowledge'. Clearly one can acquire knowledge through learning, without that knowledge being the 'proper use and meaning of signs and things' - much the same as one would do through standard definitions of study. Leaving aside this somewhat false dichotomy for the moment, what then is it 'to study' for Lewis in his reading of Agamben? His first full definition of it in his book is:

> *To study is to care for the indeterminate potentiality of potentiality itself*. It is to let shine not this or that practice, thing, or sign but rather the potentiality of this or that *to* shine. Studying is therefore not a decision to opt for the nothing of nihilism or the wilful production of the self or the shine of the sacred but rather a discovery of the conditions for the world, its primordial im-potentiality. To study the lack of signification as significant is to dwell in an im-potential realm where potentiality appears in its withdrawing from any actualisation of this potentiality. (36)

This definition is introduced as a 'state of stupification' (36) which prioritises nothing except the 'silent call of im-potentiality itself' (36). Lewis gives this state of 'dwelling' what seems like a quasi-mystical turn when he claims that im-potentiality is 'the only thing that remains when the gods have fled and the world stands in darkness' (36). Perhaps as if the mind could somehow be set free from things, practices and signs - as if im-potentiality (and the context built around it) was not itself a complex of signs. Just before this passage he explains that:

> When studying, the studier experiences a willing openness to the potentiality of the world to be *and* not be simultaneously. The im-potentiality of a world enables the world to be experience *rather than* what it has become, without forcing any particular actualization of this im-potentiality. When all ontological differences disappear, all that is left is a potentiality without a project or focal practice. (35)

Again, perhaps as if it were possible to escape language, memory, possession and occupation. As if it were not necessary to *think* studying. Even at this early stage of the book

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there is a sense that Lewis will have a difficult task ahead: in writing a book advocating doing nothing except existing in a state of stupification he is explicitly doing the opposite: he is teaching us how to study. We later learn that there are very particular things that must be learned to prepare oneself for this exalted stupid state and that there is a 'method' of the studier which is, predictably, opposed to the method of learner:

> The method of the learner is to collect signs and things in order to reproduce them (always in measurable amounts) as evidence of the potentiality to be or do, whereas the method of the studier is to collect signatures in order to get lost, wander, and thus experience the im-potentiality to be and not to be, do and not do simultaneously. (94)

I don't think Lewis would hesitate to call the method of the studier a pointless indulgence. He repeatedly exhibits what could only be described as a pride in the purposelessness of studying. And because studying would not be studying if one learned anything at all from it, this pointlessness is active at every level, except in its strange self-prioritisation: it is significant that we study but nothing we do while studying can *remain* significant. Contra Lewis, it is certainly possible to argue that the method of studying he advocates would often result in learning – and perhaps be considered of particular significance when it does. As such, while there is much to be lauded in an advocacy of learning through getting lost and wandering (or attending to how one learns when one does so), there seems little to no significance in 'studying' when learning is (at least in theory) forcibly prohibited as a result. If Lewis were to open the idea of study to the possibility of undirected learning it would be able to take on the educational dimension which at the moment, in my reading at least, it lacks. Study comes across as a paralysed and paralysing concept, quite against Lewis's argument that it opens up and sustains 'a new notion of freedom' (35). Rather than setting up study as the complete antithesis of learning, there might be much to be gained from seeing it as another mode of learning.

To further understand Lewis' conception of study - and why I suggest it would benefit from incorporating a broadened but different notion of learning - one must familiarise oneself more thoroughly with what he means when he writes about potentiality and im-potentiality; themselves terms from Giorgio Agamben's lexicon. Helpfully Lewis outlines Agamben's terms:

> potentiality is not simply a positive capacity, propensity, or capability to achieve specific goals through specific courses of action. Rather, potentiality is always already accompanied by an equally primordial im-potentiality. When thought together, potentiality to be and im-potentiality not to be form a paradoxical tautology: the potentiality to be and not to be simultaneously. (38)

To study, then, for Lewis, is to care for the fact that something might or might not be. This seems to be the major lesson of the book. To 'study' means to not do anything that might be significant to you while contemplating that you either can or cannot do – which in itself is (somewhat taulogocially) significant. This definition is later expanded (and possibly contradicted) to include what Lewis calls (via Gever Tulley) 'tinkering' which would be 'thought of as a *pure* means rather than simply a *means to another end'* (114). Even further

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on, this tinkering is analogised with and as 'studious play' (127-130). I would argue that tinkering and studious play are the ripest pickings of Lewis' text, especially convincing when he prescrbes for both in the classroom:

> …the danger of tinkering should be given a space and time within the child's educational life – even if this means exposing them to the dangers of calamities. Tinkering in this sense – with all its fits and starts, its rhythmic suspension – is the experience of the transmission and transmissibility let loose from determinate ends, plans, and pre-existing measurements that attempt to capture, judge and evaluate outcomes. (130)

However, when he goes a step further to state that 'These children tinker in order to experience the sudden appearance of their collective im-potentiality' (130), the tinkering seems a little (at least theoretically) instrumental after all. Equally, is it not possible that children would learn through their tinkering? About the things they tinker with? About themselves? And about other tinkerers? Perhaps even in such a manner that they might reposition themselves in terms of rejecting or changing objective goals and outcomes? However, this pathway is blocked for Lewis because of the false dichotomy he draws between study and learning.

The two key examples that Lewis utilises to make his argument via Agamben are Herman Melville's short story 'Bartleby the Scrivener' and Occupy Wall Street. Interestingly Lewis seems unaware or uninterested in the fact that Bartleby had, in one of the USAs major liberal periodicals, *The New Republic*, become the 'Patron Saint of Occupy Wall Street' (Martyris 2011). It is possible that there is an in-joke here where Lewis is attempting to give the impression that he is an 'inactive, lazy, or simply apathetic' researcher. All characteristics he assigns to 'one who studies' and Bartleby (52). However, even if this omission is intentional, its absence seems strange in a context where another easily searchable (and much discussed) article described OWS as 'Bartleby's Occupation of Wall Street' (Gersen 2011).

In attempting to map the political dimensions of study and im-potentiality, leading up to his discussion of OWS, Lewis argues that 'The hesitation of studying – and its rhythmic, indeterminate oscillation between profound boredom and inspiration and back again – seems to be a radical refusal of the call to be this or that type of political subject with this or that agenda and this or that set of specific demands' (149). This may be an interesting elaboration of a relation to the political but the question is: why is what Lewis is describing in this context 'studying' at all? In any common or garden variety? Isn't it simply 'radical refusal'? And why does it need the complicated (and perhaps ultimately un-revelatory) logic of Agamben's im-potentiality to support it? One wonders if, while Lewis's conception of learning may be too narrow, his conception of study it too broad. In a briefer and more lucid piece on both Bartleby and Occupy Wall Street, Lee Edelman (2013) asks (and answers 'no' to) the questions: 'Can literature separate itself from politics without proving itself political? Can political discourse escape the overdetermination of the literary?' (102). In so doing, Edelman reads Bartleby not as a character who exemplifies a desirable ontological disposition described by a contemporary philosopher (Agamben) but as a character in a literary work in its own right, eventually asking if 'the negativity that prefers not to pledge itself to the goal of a new community and declines its positivization in a recognizably

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political agenda [might] remain faithful, by that very refusal, to what vitalizes politics as such?' (116). While Lewis' *On Study* contains many sentiments that also come across in Edelman's article, his reading of Agamben seems to tie him in complicated knots over what, in political terms, seems like an incredibly straightforward premise: it is possible to exist outside of socially prioritised exigencies, either by ignoring or refusing them. Why this rejection of socially prioritised exigencies is labelled 'study' is unclear and perhaps also unhelpful, particularly given that one might *learn* techniques of refusal or even *learn* asocial ways of being.

Alternatively, if we are to take Bartleby's (and Lewis's) 'I'd prefer not to' seriously there is perhaps yet another problem with *On Study*: the end point of *On Study* is a place where 'prolonged reflection, observation, and aesthetic creativity' (140) are given a serious and significant value. Lewis then softens Bartleby's 'I'd prefer not to' into a 'I prefer not to judge just yet…' (140). This seems like a very odd lesson to take from Melville's short story, which of course ends with Bartleby preferring not to eat and dying because of it. Bartleby's 'I'd prefer not to' is unrelenting and will not be softened and sweetly humanised into arguments for 'prolonged reflection, observation, and aesthetic creativity' through tinkering and studious play. Again, while Lewis possibly goes too far in suggesting that no learning can or should occur in studying he, at the same time, goes nowhere near far enough in his reading of Bartleby, which he sees as 'not teaching us *what* to write, or *how* to write, but rather than we *can/cannot* write' (52), seemingly ignoring that Bartleby eventually prefers not to do anything that will keep him alive: a rather different 'lesson'. As Edelman's reading shows, Bartleby's 'I'd prefer not to' is a harsh and self-destructive refusal of human sociality which stands for – or teaches – nothing: 'If it teaches, it teaches us nothing – or, more precisely, the *place* of that nothing, that non, in the politics of the human and, therefore, the place of the humanities in the performance of every politics' (Edelman 2013, 114-115). It does not teach us a way of being, certainly not a way of being which could be commodified into a 'method of the studier.' Lewis seems completely un-phased by the problems of moving from the fatal asociality of Bartleby to proclaiming the friendship and 'joy' of the tinkering community (139). For both Lewis and, in his reading, Agamben, the studier is at once completely separate from sociality and its exigencies and yet somehow able to engage and desirous of engaging in joyous social relations. Perhaps another definition of the relationship between potentiality and impotentiality is having your cake and eating it too.

Even though it is mired in complex philosophical discussion, Lewis's central argument could probably be summarised not as 'I'd prefer not to' but as: *I'd prefer to have fun and forget about what I think society wants me to do and be for a short while*. The spirit of this position is far better represented by Tulley and his 'tinkering' than Agamben and his 'im-potentiality'. Equally, Tulley's tinkering doesn't seem to prohibit learning in the way that Lewis seems convinced that 'study' must. Finally, the Agamben-inspired reading of Bartleby seems to work in direct contra-distinction to the direction that Lewis ultimately takes with his argument, especially if one is to take seriously the fact that Bartleby's behaviour leads towards the fatal conclusion of the story. With this in mind, Maurice Blanchot (1986) provides a much more convincing reading of Melville's story than Agamben and Lewis when he writes:

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> Bartleby gives up (not that he ever pronounces, or clarifies this renunciation) ever saying anything; he gives up the authority to speak. This is abnegation understood as the abandonment of the self, the relinquishment of identity, refusal which does not cleave to refusal but opens to failure, to the loss of being, to thought. "I will not do it" would still have signified an energetic determination, calling forth an equally energetic contradiction. "I would prefer not to…" belongs to the infiniteness of patience; no dialectical intervention can take hold of such passivity. We have fallen out of being, outside where, immobile, proceeding with a slow and even step, destroyed men come and go. (17)

These 'destroyed men' are clearly not the joyous 'studiers' that Lewis wants to be inspired through tinkering, which is no doubt a good thing. Bartleby is no role model and no teacher, despite perhaps being an 'educator' in the broad sense. As, amongst other things, his story shows that you can only refuse sociality for a short while if you want to survive. Study, in Lewis's approach, is a luxury that few can afford, especially at the cost of learning. And by this I do not only mean learning in terms of certified outcomes but also learning how to survive in a world where there is so much not to like and so much we might want to change; not least ourselves.

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